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Polish Passion for Technology May Breed Political Change

By Dan Morgan

Washington Post Foreign Service

WARSAW—At Poland's Ministry of Technology, officials talk openly this fall of buying an entire computer factory from the West, or of exporting locally made Fiat cars to raise hard currency for buying advanced IBM machines.

"We are a small country, and we can't do everything ourselves," said Prof. Zbigniew Jasicki, as he spoke of licensing deals, joint ventures and trade packages with which to fill the gaps in Polish technology.

Jasicki's thinking is typical of that which permeates Poland nowadays at one level.

Technology and the drive for economic efficiency are to Eastern Europe in the 1970s what heavy steel production was to the socialist countries in the 1950s—a near obsession.

Everybody, from old guard Polish partisans to young technocrats, pays lip service to the need for more modernization.

Led by Gomulka

Party chief Wladyslaw G. Gomulka has put himself at the head of the drive in speech after speech, subtly substituting this cause for the abandoned one of watchfulness of West Germany (from whom some of the new technology will doubtless come).

Yet almost all Polish analysts agree that modernization has the potential for producing significant political changes in the long run. The losers could well be some of the very dogmatists who helped nip a radical economic reform in the bud after 1956, and who may have helped write compromises into the reforms begun in 1965 and continuing this year with the drafting of a new five-year plan.

"An era has ended," said one Communist. "We are entering a new period. Without speculating on personalities one can ask whether the revolutionaries who tore down the old bourgeois-capitalist system are necessarily the right ones to build up the new socialist system of the computer age."

Personalities Involved

Nevertheless there is private speculation in Warsaw about personalities, particularly about the future role of Stanislaw Kociolok, the dynamic Gdansk party chief

who was elevated to the politburo in 1968 while still in his 30s, and—in the economic sphere—about the place of men such as Jozef Pajestka, 44, a key man in the economic brain trust at the Planning Institute.

They are believed representative of the "realist" trends welling up in the party, trends fueled by powerful pressure for modernization at all costs. So far they have scored only modest victories.

But the rationale for modernization is a dynamic one in itself, as can be seen from developments within Poland's computer industry.

In the 1950s, this industry was on a par with most of the West European countries, mainly because of the distinguished mathematicians working in the country.

But Polish planners gave the computer industry low priority, and production at the main Elwro plant in Wroclaw, which turns out the "Odra," rapidly fell behind quotas.

Today's Decline

As research and development accelerated in the West, Poland found its own achievements bracketed by technological breakthroughs abroad and in need of filling the gap. Today, Poland is far behind in software, and in tapes and punch cards—the vital "input" ingredients. Its 150 operating computers are about half the number Switzerland has, for example.

The country's technologists say frankly that Poland is faced not only with obtaining foreign software and machines for immediate use—but also with a need for know-how (such as an entire computer factory) in order to continue its own computer development program.

This fall technicians are installing the first Odra-1304, a data-processing machine, in the Federal Office of Statistics—hopefully in time to help with 1970 census.

But the statistics office had already "gone outside" to fill the "gap" caused by delays in Odra-1304 production. Several years ago it bought a (second generation) computer system from the British firm of ICL—including tapes and equipment. This—and not the Odra—is currently the core of the statistics office's data-processing operations.

It took prodigious effort for a small country such as Poland, which had only 7,000 engineers in 1945, to produce a machine such as the Odra, but some people question whether it was worth the effort.

Poland has proved itself adept at getting a maximum payoff from imported technology.

For this reason, Polish planners are putting priority emphasis on building up "glamor industries" over the next five years, particularly petrochemicals and electronics, while continuing to pour money into mining operations—copper, coal, sulfur and zinc—which bring in foreign exchange through exports. Most planners think links will be increased with West Germany, particularly in electronics, where cooperation is already going on with companies such as Grundig and Siemens.

Modernizing Phone System

At the same time, much emphasis is being placed on the "infrastructure"—for example, modernizing the country's antiquated telephone system which uses limited-load cables far below world standards. This will leave little money for increasing the share of research and development in the Polish economy from its present modest 2.5 per cent. of the gross national product.

Most of the "realists" and "modernizers" agree with these priorities, but there have been signs that economic dogmatists still have a large say in the politically sensitive internal economic reforms.

The new generation of realistic planners has won acceptance for substituting "profitability" for quota fulfillment as the criterion for judging enterprises' efficiency.

New 5-Year Plan

But planners make clear that the new five-year plan, still in draft form will contain no Hungarian-style "deviations" from orthodoxy, and the even more radical Yugoslav model was described by one economist as a "return to 19th century mercantilism."

This means that the essentials of a centrally controlled economy will be kept, but with enterprises playing a more active part in drawing up the plan, and with more autonomy for the industrial branches and less

interference from Warsaw in daily operations. There will be no shift to an "economy of the market place," and no freeing of prices such as has taken place on a limited scale in Hungary.

More important, planners indicate that there will be no radical shift in priorities to consumer goods production.

Economists' Concern

Even among economists (considered to be "realists") there is genuine debate on whether an economy with such an urgent need to invest in industrial specialization can afford to pump money too heavily into the consumer sector at this stage.

But there is almost no disagreement among economists about the need to overhaul the present price structure—a reform loaded with political implications.

That is why officials are waiting to see if prices will be revised Jan. 1 to reflect world prices more closely, as the pragmatists have been demanding.

For the effect of this could be to lower some prices and put extreme pressure on some enterprises which have been merely coasting under the present artificial scheme. The price reform, therefore, would hit the inefficient "political factories" hardest, and expose them under the new "profitability" test.

Tourism Neglected

Western diplomats believe, that the innocuous business of tourism may also be a guide to the course of the dialogue between economic realists and more orthodox politicians.

Tourism would offer a quick hard-currency return on investments, but so far Poland has been sluggish about committing funds to the development of its rich mountain, lake and ocean areas.

One politburo member was reliably quoted as saying that the underlying reason was reluctance to "see our country crawling with petit bourgeois types from the West."

This remark shows the depth of political feelings aroused by the quest for efficiency and modernization in Poland. For now, the consensus appears to be to introduce modest reforms and take no major risks—all the while taking from the West the "selective" technology